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Payson residents now need permit for exotic animals

New rules for giant snakes also cover wolf-hybrids, alligators, skunks, bears and a host of other critters

By [Pete Aleshire](#)

February 8, 2011

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The Payson Town Council last week added a host of animals including 6-foot-long boa constrictors, wolf-hybrids, bears, alligators and primates to its list of exotic animals requiring a permit from the police department.

The council overrode the objections of a local pet store owner, Shannon Long, and 170 petition-signers to an ordinance that singles out "exotic" animals for a permit and possible inspection.

"You're hundreds of times more likely to be killed by tap water than a large constrictor, yet we're not afraid of our kitchen sinks," said Long. "This is just a case of over regulation. We cannot continue to place regulations on people 'just because.' We will soon lose our freedom to do or say anything."

Ironically, a memo by Police Chief Don Engler explained that the need for the ordinance arose chiefly because the town's animal control officer discovered Long was keeping a 10-foot-long reticulated python in a 2-foot-square cage.

When the animal control officer said the snake needed a larger cage, Long replied that the town had no authority over the conditions in which he kept the animals.

That prompted the town to draft an ordinance that required a permit for a long list of animals and gave the police department the authority

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to approve the conditions in which owners keep the animals. The ordinance also covers crocodiles, cayman, raccoons, skunks, foxes, bears, bison, deer, elk, moose, sea mammals, poisonous reptiles, all feline species besides domestic cats. The town already had an exotic animal ordinance, but it didn't define the species covered or include the welfare provisions.

The town also presented several articles and a letter from Russ Johnson, president of the Phoenix Herpetological Society, on the care and feeding of reticulated pythons — which can grow to 33 feet in length and weigh up to 300 pounds. Johnson's letter said that the potentially dangerous snakes need cages at least half their own length, with room for a big water dish.

Engler's letter said that Long had initially refused to put the python in a larger cage, but has since moved the snake to a 5-foot-long cage.

"I do see it as the responsibility of the Payson Police Department Animal Control Division to oversee exotic pets in our community and I believe that a reticulated python is definitely an animal which falls under the exotic pet definition," Engler wrote.

The entire public discussion of the town's updated ordinance has focused on constrictors larger than 6 feet in length, although the chief impact will likely be on far more common pets like wolf-hybrid dogs.

John Roberts also attended the public hearing last Thursday to object to the new regulations. He owns lizards. The only lizards considered exotics under the terms of the ordinance are venomous lizards like Mexican Beaded Lizards and Gila Monsters, which are also covered by separate state regulations.

Roberts said that his children play with their pet lizards and have never had a problem, but were attacked recently by a pet cat at a friend's house. Yet the exotic animals would face more stringent regulations than dogs and cats, which cause far more injuries and deaths.

According to figures compiled by the National Safety Council, captive reptiles cause 1.5 deaths annually in the U.S., but almost all of those deaths involve people who own poisonous snakes.

Dogs cause 32 deaths annually, horses 212, bees and wasps 66, contact with hot tap water 26, all terrain vehicles 906, car crashes 44,700, gun accidents 730 and assaults with a gun 12,000.

"I just don't know that reptiles are a really big issue" requiring regulation, said Roberts.

Councilor Ed Blair asked whether Long objected to certain provisions of the ordinance.

"Honestly, I'm against the whole thing. The numbers don't add up," said Long.

Chief Engler said the ordinance would give the department the legal authority to protect both the public and the exotic animals themselves.

He said he expected the one-time permit fee would remain below the annual, \$7 cost of a dog license.

- > No
- > Undecided

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The council approved the revisions in the ordinance on a 7-0 vote.

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9 February 2011 at 12:57 p.m.

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[ShannonLong](#) (Shannon Long) says...

First of all, shame on the Town Counsel for passing an ordinance when the public that they are there to serve spoke out against it. All we can do is cry no, as more of our freedoms are taken away. I guess the president isn't the only one that disregards public opinion.

Second the information about my snake is wrong. I was keeping him in the display cage during the day only. 10ft sounds huge for a snake, but he only took up 1/2 of the 2ft sq cage. This would be equal to having a dog in a dog crate. Right now he has himself completely inside his water tub, which is only 14"x10"x6". He's not really as big as you'd think. Prior to any inquiries about him; I would move him to a 6ft x 2.5ft cage at night. This system is just fine for him since they are more active at night anyway. During the day he would sleep curled up, taking up only half of the smaller display cage. Recently I purchased a used cage from a customer and moved him into it fulltime. In fact the cage this snake now has is much too large for him at his current size. You would think bigger is better, but it is not always the case. In regards to a Ball Python, a larger space will stress them and cause them to hide more. With the Reticulated Python, it sees a larger space as a territory and may become aggressive as to defend the area. Many reptile keepers have found that keeping these Pythons in a proper sized cage can keep them relatively tame. Even in the short time I've kept this snake, I've seen him become more agitated in the larger cage. This larger cage has a perimeter of 17ft and would house a snake up to 18ft in length. The small cage that he would spend his days in before has an 8ft perimeter. Which by the numbers is not too small, but we wouldn't recommend it. Chief Engler should not be quoting me since he has not talked to me once. I have never said, "that the town had no authority over the conditions in which he kept the animals." I did state that they don't need an ordinance to enforce humane treatment of any animals. Chief Engler himself answered in the 1st public hearing about this ordinance that there are state laws they could use. We don't need a special ordinance to make other pets illegal to own without permit, just to enforce humane treatment. Sounds like a bunch of excuses to me. This is more about me refusing to move my snake when Officer Tanner (who has no experience or knowledge of reptiles) told me to. Heaven forbid we don't bend to every whim of Officer Tanner.

9 February 2011 at 3:11 p.m.

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[DanVarnes](#) (Dan Varnes) says...

Excellent post, Mr. Long.

One of the best "life lessons" I've ever learned was to always get BOTH sides of any story before making up your mind.

Shannon, please make sure that your side is published in the Roundup, ASAP.

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